

CITY OF SYDNEY

MEALS ON WHEELS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

TRANSCRIPT*

Name: Graham Kerr

Date: 5 April 2007

Place: Surry Hills

Interviewer: Margo Beasley

Duplicates: Master CD held in CoS Archives
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SUMMARY

Graham Kerr is a former high school teacher who now works part time and volunteers with the City of Sydney's Meals on Wheels (MoW) service every Friday. He shares the run with another man. They shift between being driver or runner on each run because they find that because of their own personalities they have good relationships with different clients. They alternate cars week and week about. Both Graham and his co-driver like to take the time to talk to MoW clients because they are often the only human contact for the day. Graham was involved with different kinds of community work as a high school teacher in both Australia and Indonesia but says he has enough money for his needs now and enjoys volunteering for community service in his own time. In his three years with MoW he has developed affection for particular clients. One was a mentally ill woman who had had a stroke some years before and died unexpectedly. Another is a ninety year old man who likes cricket and horses and regards Graham as a gentleman like himself. He says that although much is provided by government to assist people to stay in their homes, many MoW clients would benefit from the increased human contact of twenty four hour institutional care. His MoW work has brought home the problems of ageing, from which many people are shielded, but has also induced a desire to do more volunteer work. He is interested in using his teaching skills to assist immigrants with English.

TRANSCRIPT

This is an interview with Mr Graham Kerr. It's taking place in his home in Surry Hills in Sydney. The project is the City of Sydney's History Programme's Meals on Wheels Oral History Project. Interviewer is Margo Beasley and the date is the 5th of April, 2007.

Graham, I might just ask you, if you wouldn't mind, to introduce yourself and just tell us where and when you were born?

Hi, Margo, and hello. My name is Graham Kerr. I was born in Melbourne sixty three years ago. I've basically – I went to Melbourne University and got a degree in arts and education. I've tutored at Melbourne University, spent a number of years – a couple of years – working as a public relations officer with an electricity company, I have done teaching at Haileybury College in Melbourne. I then moved to the Gold Coast where I spent sixteen years teaching at the Southport School on the Gold Coast, then decided I need a new direction in life and got a job overseas in Indonesia, teaching at the American International School in Jakarta. Had sixteen great years there, very inspiring and interesting, and I'm now back in Sydney, working part time, watering plants in offices in the city and thoroughly enjoying it. It's great (taps table) not having to do the marking and the homework.

So, basically you've retired from teaching but you haven't retired from the workforce?

No, I can't ever imagine retiring from anything (laughs) totally, Margo.

But you didn't want to teach any more?

No. I felt the job in Jakarta was a great way to go out of teaching. I went out on a high: it was interesting, challenging, very different from Australia and I felt I'd had a wonderful time and to come back and teach in Australia, I thought, was going to be a bit of a comedown. (laughs)

How long have you been doing Meals on Wheels?

About three years.

What prompted your involvement?

Well, while I was a teacher and I taught at private schools and the schools I was at had one afternoon a week which was where you could either do cadets or you could do community service projects. I certainly wasn't interested in cadets, so the service idea really appealed to me and I did that in Melbourne when I taught at Haileybury, taking groups of boys out to do gardening jobs, mainly for pensioners, on one afternoon a week. When I moved to the Gold Coast we had very close relationships with old people's homes on the Gold Coast. We would organise the boys to develop concerts and shows and put

on drama productions and we would always invite elderly folk to come along and see the first presentation of those shows. So, we built up a really nice contact with those people, I really enjoyed meeting them, and yeah, really enjoyed that they had enjoyed the afternoon out from the old people's home and they always left saying, "I'm looking forward to the next show", and that was great.

But volunteering is a bit different from that again, isn't it? I mean, it's similar but that was in a way a part of your professional life. Now what you do is you do still work several days a week, I think, but you volunteer on one of your days off - - -

That's right.

- - - to do something in your own time, unpaid. So, there's another element to it, rather than just enjoying it as you did in your professional life as a teacher?

I think now there's the whole thing of giving something to a community. Money – I'm not really a money person – I'm very lucky I have enough money (laughs) to do all the things I want to do but I really just decided that I'd like to do something in a volunteer capacity and I saw an article in one of the local papers which listed the number of volunteer programmes that were offered in Sydney City and I thought, "Well, Meals on Wheels, I'll start with that", but certainly there are a number of organisations or number of activities which did appeal to me at the time but I thought this is a good one to start with.

Tell me a bit about the runs you do for Meals on Wheels. You don't deliver in the Surry Hills area, do you?

No, I don't. It's a fairly wide run: it starts off: pick up the meals down in St Peters and then scoot across to Rosebery, have a couple of customers there, then I come back to Beaconsfield, then across the Alexandria, Newtown and Erskineville, then back to St Peters to finish off.

About how many meals would you deliver?

It varies a little bit. At the moment I'm doing about fourteen but it has been up to twenty. It's a little bit seasonal: sometimes summer people go away to stay with families and meals are cancelled, sometimes they have family staying there, so they don't need the meals. So, it's a little bit up and down.

Are you a driver or a runner?

Both, Margo. I work with a wonderful man called Bruce who – we have a lot in common – and one week - we sort of tend to share it and one week I bring my car so I'm mainly the driver and he's the runner. The other week he brings his car and he's the driver and I'm the runner. This way we get to know everybody and, yes, it's just a change from either driving or running.

And you enjoy the contact, I assume. I mean, the runners have the contact, the drivers often don't.

Right, although even – Bruce and I have worked out there are customers that like us and we like them and there are customers I think, “Oh, I think I'll leave them to Bruce”. So, even though I might be driving or Bruce might be driving we will still do a little bit of – we'll pull the car up and I will get out and go into a customer that maybe I have an attachment to or really like or there's two elderly guys that Bruce gets on really well with; if he's driving he will always take their food into them because he likes to have a little chat with them, whereas I haven't really developed contact with those two, but others I have.

Can you give me a bit of a picture of some of the people that you visit and that you also like or have warmed to in some way?

I think probably one of the most interesting ones was a woman who was my age but she'd had a stroke at eighteen and she was schizophrenic, lived in a little bedsitting Housing Commission place in Erskineville, had great difficulty in moving around. When I tapped on her door it was probably about ten minutes - it seemed like half an hour before she actually got to the door. Difficult. In fact, Bruce didn't sort of fit in very well there but she and I had this contact and communication. She told me a little bit about her life. She lived next door to a guy who had diabetes and she had gone to school with him and I gather that the two of them had been put in adjoining apartments because they were very close companions. But Laurel, yes, she liked me coming, she liked telling me what she liked. She'd ask me, “Now, what have I got today?” and I would say – she loved chocolate mousse, told me to always try and get her a chocolate mousse but I mean, I do have to take her (laughs) what I'm given but it was, it was, yeah, a very personal, close relationship and I was quite visibly shaken when she just died one week. She had gone into hospital but I asked – I said, “Is Laurel not home yet?” and Tina at Meals on Wheels said she died during the week. I really felt as if I'd lost a very personal friend.

As indeed you had.

Yes, exactly.

Are there other people who you've become - - -

There are other people, you know, that are – you sort of wonder what's happened to them. There's a wonderful ninety year old man who was very much with it. He's very complimentary, thinks I'm a wonderful gentleman and says he doesn't think there are too many of us left. But he likes cricket and he talks about that and he likes following the horses and so on but does not appear to have any family and I don't tend to ask about those things, I like them to volunteer, and perhaps when I – I do know him quite well and would feel comfortable about asking him, “Well, do you have family?” But, you know, some of them, you know, take a little while to get to know. Others, you tend to identify with fairly quickly. I was rather amused this morning – I popped a

meal in to a lady and she – we were talking at the gate as we normally do and an Asian transvestite walked past, talking very loudly on the telephone, on a mobile telephone, and Ann said to me, “Oh, isn’t that strange. Was it a man or a woman?” She said, “I really don’t understand the, this thing about (laughs) a man, you know, dressed as a woman but it is actually a man’s voice. Do you think you could explain to me (laughs) what that person is all about?” So, we had an interesting five, ten minute conversation about the whole thing. She seemed a little bit more aware of the situation when I left – but it’s nice being able to communicate at that level, where people do ask you about things that worry them.

And because you work with Bruce, does that mean that you can be a little bit more leisurely about the time that you spend? Because some people do actually say they’re very pressured when they’re doing the runs and there isn’t any time to actually have much of a conversation.

Well, Bruce and I are pretty laid back and we like the idea of communication, though some people rush in with a meal and you leave it there and you rush out the door and you say, “I’m in a hurry”. I guess Bruce and I - perhaps the fact we only do it once a week we feel we’ve got a little bit more time and if someone wants to talk - because we both realise that we’re probably the only person they’re going to talk to for that day - we feel it’s no skin off our nose to stay there and talk to them and find out a little bit more about them and then we share our information in the car, which helps us get to know people.

What’s your general impression about the circumstances of people who are receiving Meals on Wheels?

The very first week I did Meals on Wheels, Margo, I went with a couple who have done it for a long time and I thought – I had no idea people could live like this. I went into some pretty awful places and I thought, “I don’t think I can do this”, but I thought, “No, I’ve got to give it a chance”, and yes, I felt fairly comfortable after about three or four weeks. I still think, you know, although the federal government seems to do an enormous amount in providing - well, you know, the state government and the City of Sydney too, I guess, provide a lot of facilities for people to enable them to stay in their own houses but there are still a lot of people who should actually be receiving twenty four hour care in some sort of an institution.

What kinds of people are you thinking of when you say that?

Well, Laurel springs to mind - the lady, the schizophrenic lady who’d had a stroke, totally bent over, found it very difficult to move and I know one time I arrived there and she told me she’d had a terrible night because she’d fallen out of bed and she showed me a plastic bucket by the bed where she would use as a toilet because she couldn’t get to the toilet in the evening - but she was quite comfortable showing me this plastic bucket where she had a “pee”, as she said.

So, in other words you're saying that really she would have benefited from some kind of more 'round the clock institutional care?

That's right, and particularly having, you know, having more visitors, people to talk to, perhaps staff coming in and out. I think she enjoyed our visits; I think she got a lot out of them. I know I did – but she was difficult to start with. (laughs)

What do you think of the standard of the food with Meals on Wheels? There probably hasn't been a lot of – you've only been doing it for three years, so there probably hasn't been a huge amount of change in that time?

Well, Margo, I must say I've been very, very impressed with the amount of organisation that goes into actually getting the meals ready. You know, a lot of people tend to knock Meals on Wheels – I've had friends whose parents have been thinking about it but said, "Oh, you know, the meals are not very good" - but I'm just amazed at the database which has been built up at Meals on Wheels on every customer and they've got their likes and dislikes. For example, when I mentioned to Tina at Meals on Wheels that Laurel liked chocolate mousse she immediately added that to Laurel's file. So, I have been fairly impressed by the quality of the food which is actually presented. It can be a little bit monotonous and people sometimes will say, "Oh, what have I got today?" and you say, "Well, it's this". "Oh, I had that two days ago and I didn't like it" but generally, you know, people - the reaction is very positive. I do occasionally bring a meal home at the request of Meals on Wheels and eat it and give them my honest opinion. The last one I brought home was an Indian lamb curry and I thought the lamb was of pretty poor quality and I passed that back to them and there were pears in jelly which were really very, very hard and I thought, well, someone with dentures and so on would find this very difficult to eat into. So, in fact, you know, the pears could have been diced or made smaller so that people wouldn't have had that problem. Had a lady this morning that she found eating grilled chump chops very difficult and I think that's something that, you know, perhaps people don't think about. We tend to think one size fits everybody – but it is good to know that the database does include, yeah, people's likes and dislikes and I think they go to a lot of trouble to make sure that people get what they like.

And there are, of course, really specific nutritional requirements. Quite a few people, I imagine, would be diabetic for instance?

Right. Well, they all have special meals which is, you know, they have a special label put on their food, both for the main meal and the dessert. So, all of those things are taken into account.

Have you ever found yourself in any kind of difficulty? Occasionally, people get food thrown at them or the odd person has been held up for the takings – you probably aren't involved in that but once a week somebody collects the money. Have you ever had any problems like that?

Not really. No, I can't say that I've – I know I had a man who was in the early stages of dementia and I was told to make sure that I put the food on the table, took the lid off the food and sat him down so that he could focus on the food. If I didn't sit him down then he would forget the food was actually there – but apart from that I can't say that there have been many issues. Some customers – as I said – have expressed, "Oh, I don't like that" or, "I had it two days ago. Why don't they make the meals more varied than what they do?"

Some people would see that as ingratitude but of course they do actually pay for Meals on Wheels.

That's right, they do.

It's not a free service, it's subsidised, I think.

Well, I sort of see it as pretty valuable feedback and I'm encouraged to actually report to Tina at Meals on Wheels on my observations and let them know and that's why I tend to - you know, I do eat food from there occasionally, to test it and let them know what I thought of it but I have had some excellent meals but I've also had some that I felt really weren't up to scratch.

A lot of people that I've talked to have told me that they actually get a lot out of Meals and Wheels, doing it, that it's not – I think they might say, "Well, it's not as altruistic as it seems because I also get a benefit", and I'm wondering - I guess that's a primary motivating factor, really, is that there is some kind of benefit, you want to do it because it also gives you something – and I'm just wondering if you could talk a bit about that, the way that it works for you.

Well, as I said, I think there is a lot of personal satisfaction in being able to help people who are not able to help themselves and I don't think – it's not an onerous job. It's something you sort of get up on Friday morning and you present yourself at ten o'clock and you know that at twelve o'clock you'll be back here, so it doesn't really take very much time – but, yes, I think there is a personal sense of satisfaction; I've done something, I've helped someone and I think, "God, I hope when I'm – if I was ever in that situation or (laughs) when I get older that someone might do this for me". So, perhaps I'm trying to insure myself for the future. (laughs)

Do you think about that quite a bit for the future?

I think it brings the problems of ageing home to one. You know, you do tend to think about it: how are these people in this situation, why do they not have families, why do they not have people visiting, how have they arrived in this particular situation in life – and I think most people are shielded from those particular things and people wouldn't realise that these things were happening all around them. So, it's brought home to me a number of pretty pertinent

issues related to ageing. I think it's made me think a little, a lot more about issues associated with ageing.

I assume you don't have children of your own?

No.

So, that becomes quite an acute issue, I suppose – not that that necessarily ensures that old people will be taken care of anyway, particularly, I guess, in the modern world where people move so much. They're often long distances and working and so on, it's not possible, necessarily, but we do have an ageing population and you'd be, I guess, more or less in the baby boomer demographic.

That's right.

And there's going to be a lot more people of similar age, very old, at the same time. So, is that part of your thinking, wondering about how things might work out?

Very much so, Margo, yes. Where am I going to be in twenty years' (laughs) time - I don't really know. I'd like to think that I'm, you know, surrounded by people, whereas the people I visit each week I don't see them being surrounded by people. They don't appear to have families, I don't hear much of – some of them do – but you don't hear very much about a family and sometimes at Christmas you might say, "Is the family visiting you for Christmas?" and there's always, "No, I've lost touch with my family" - and it think makes me very determined to make sure that I don't lose touch with my family and I take the opportunity to go to family gatherings. My great nephew and niece, it's their first and second birthday in Melbourne next week and I'll certainly be going down; I'll meet up with my brothers and sisters who I don't see very often – but I think it motivates me to, yeah, communicate with people, keep in touch, in the hope that I won't be by myself in 20 years' time. (laughs)

Yes, it's going to be quite a big problem and I think one in which agencies that look after these things are going to have to come to terms with in a way that's not really necessary now. So, do you intend to continue with Meals on Wheels?

Yes, because I enjoy it very much – I did an extra session this morning. Normally, there wouldn't be a delivery tomorrow but they were short, so I volunteered to go in this morning, which was good. I think I'd like to get a little bit more involved in perhaps some other volunteer services that are around and, yes, give a little bit more time than what I do at the moment, probably when I scaled down the plant watering.

What other services might you get involved with?

I rather like the one where you are given someone who doesn't know English – migrant person – and you are assigned to that person and you go to them

maybe once a week – I think you can go twice if you want to – but it's developed over - the relationship is developed over a period of time and I got a feeling, you know, you would develop a really nice relationship with one person and I think it would go beyond just teaching them the language. You know, Meals on Wheels is great but it is sort of in and out if you want it to be that way but even if you do stay and talk you can't – it's not a - you don't learn very much. It's just a quick communication and I rather like the idea of developing some sort of ongoing relationship with someone who wants to learn English. I guess that's the teacher sort of thing in me too – I feel (laughs) as if I might be more prepared or, yes.

Teaching's a very useful skill for a range of different kinds of occupations, isn't it?

Sure, sure. And I think the work I did in schools with old people's homes and so on, the ones I enjoyed most was where there was a longer period of contact. I mean, these elderly folks that used to come to our school plays and concerts and so on, I mean, it was nice to see them again next time they came and, "Yeah, I remember you last time" (laughs) and it was good for them as well as me – I got a lot out of it. (laughs)

Did you come from a family where there was some sense of the idea of community service?

Not really, Margo. I came from a fairly large family of five children. I must say that - you know, my father was a policeman – don't ever remember going without anything but it was never - we were never lavished with lots of gifts or money. You know, with five children and my father was a policeman, mum didn't work, I don't think money was, you know, there in great amounts but certainly I think my parents were both very great providers and the fact that, you know, I wanted to go to university and be a teacher, that was not a problem. I mean, I did get a Commonwealth Scholarship to enable me to do that, so they were not - didn't have to contribute financially, but I don't know, I think being in a family, a larger family, there is a sense of helping one another and, I mean, you know, there are lots of things we couldn't afford but I think we pitched in and did them. But as I said, I don't remember one thing we went without, don't ever remember when there was not loads of food on the table and for that (laughs) I'm eternally grateful.

Yes, I suppose it's in rather sharp contrast to some of the circumstances that you're seeing

Well, that's right.

Are there things about Meals on Wheels that you think could be improved?

Well, as I said to you before, I think the organisation is great. I think there could be a lot more awareness of individual differences. Now, I'm not quite sure how that would be catered for. I think the agencies that work for people,

you know, play a fairly valuable role but I'm not quite sure about the type of volunteer – they're not volunteers; they're actually paid by agencies to go in and do cleaning and so on – there seems to be a very high turnover of people as carers, which is unfortunate, but I guess those sort of people do tend to move on fairly quickly. But as far as Meals on Wheels goes, I think, yeah, a much more awareness of individual differences, preferences for food would, yeah, could be looked at. Not that I'm saying not a lot of effort goes into it at the moment – there is.

And I guess the problems with that are just the scale of it?

Well, that's right. You know, I'm only dealing with fourteen/twenty people. I mean, (laughs) you know, there's a huge number of people out there and when I hear stories about a lady in the Northcott block of flats up here who had been dead for six months before anybody realised that she was dead and the man next door was interviewed and he said, "No, I didn't know, I haven't seen her for so long", I feel it's providing a very valuable contact service for a lot of people. They would not see anybody else but me and I think if I can't spend a couple of minutes on a Friday morning, talking to fourteen people, then it's a pretty sad state of affairs.

O.K, thank you very much.